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Book Review: The Price of War

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BOOK REVIEW
The Price of War

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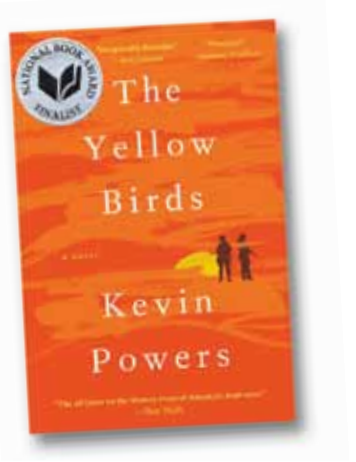
Powers, Kevin. *The Yellow Birds: A Novel*. (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2012).



Based on the rave reviews Kevin Powers' first novel, *The Yellow Birds*, has received, it appears that the literary world is ready for the next generation of war novels and author-veterans to emerge from the West's recent military misadventures in the Middle East. Most popular reviewers agree. *The Yellow Birds* is one of these books and Powers one of these authors. Not one to be easily impressed, *New York Times* book critic Michiko Kakutani labels it "a classic of contemporary war fiction." Hector Tobar of the *Los Angeles Times* calls it "the first American literary masterpiece produced by the Iraq war." *Rolling Stone*'s Darren Reidy declares it "the first great Iraq War novel." As an author, Powers has drawn numerous comparisons to Tim O'Brien, Ernest Hemingway, Erich Remarque and Siegfried Sassoon.

Individual writing styles and modes of authorship aside, Powers has earned the right to be placed in this distinguished category through his ability to communicate the immutable horrors of war and the indelible scars it leaves behind.

This book cuts like a knife and should be required reading for Americans who readily embrace military solutions to national security challenges. Powers' greatest achievement in this work may be his compelling ability to evoke the psychological wreckage the Iraq War has left behind among America's combat veterans. The book details Private James Bartle's struggles to readjust to civil society after his tour in Iraq and his efforts to organize his wartime memories into a coherent and meaningful past, all while coming to grips with the fate of his good friend, a fallen soldier. From the moment he steps back onto American soil, Bartle seethes at a nation he no longer identifies with: "the land of the free, of reality television, outlet malls and deep vein thrombosis"(101), very different concerns than those that occupied soldiers in Iraq. Powers' protagonist experiences a tremendous sense of dislocation and alienation, withdrawing completely from family, friends, and society as he struggles to cope with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), an inescapable souvenir of war. The author's gripping elucidation of the challenges combat veterans face as they reintegrate into society is powerful stuff. The adulation he endures from civilians produces a more profound sense of isolation, like a "hole is being dug because everybody is so fucking happy to see you, the murderer, the fucking accomplice, the at-bare-minimum bearer of some fucking responsibility, and everyone wants to slap you on the back and you start to want to burn the whole goddamn country down, you want to burn every goddamn yellow ribbon in sight."(145)

The question of guilt pervades this book. Bartle's guilt is intensely personal and involves a fellow soldier, but readers will detect a larger conversation at play in Powers' story. When something goes so terribly wrong, as the Iraq War did, someone ought to be held to account. Powers offers some oblique answers, but his characters are too wrapped up in their own circumstances to worry much about making any bold assertions. These are left for the reader to contemplate. But Powers does offer some biting commentary. For example, the U.S. government's decision to go to war intrudes on Bartle's anti-heroic army life, one he had adopted to escape home, prove his manhood, and avoid responsibility. As his unit prepares to deploy to Iraq, Bartle finds himself "struggling to find a sense of urgency that seemed proportional to the events unfolding in my life."(34-35) Washington faced similar challenges as it confronted an emerging insurgency after toppling Saddam Hussein's regime. In the novel, "Mother Army"

also bears a share of the responsibility, but as an institution its only goal is to roll responsibility downhill. According to the CID officer investigating Bartle's role in his comrade's death, "Shit's rolling everywhere nowadays. It's a shitty goddamn war."(188) American society is portrayed as completely oblivious and out of touch, as if plastering their cars with yellow ribbons and thanking soldiers for their service is enough and now they can return to their normal lives, completely untouched by the damage inflicted by the war. Bartle poignantly reflects that his own personal experiences have taught him "that freedom is not the same thing as the absence of accountability." (35) In the end, the veterans bear a disproportionate share of the pain, guilt and shame of a brutal war that went terribly wrong. There is no escaping that judgment because, as Bartle states, "it's all your fault, really, because you went on purpose."(145) This line, in particular, evokes O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) in which the author deems himself a coward for having gone to war rather than fleeing to Canada.

But it is the war itself that is most responsible. In Powers' capable hands, the conflict emerges as Bartle's principal antagonist, a living creature bent only on its own survival. From the book's first sentence, the war explodes on the scene stalking Bartle, his friend Private Daniel Murphy ("Murph"), and the rest of their unit. The war desires nothing more than to go on, to continue killing and corrupting. "I knew the war would have its way," Bartle observes. "The war would take what it could get. It was patient. It didn't care about objectives, or boundaries, whether you were loved by many or not at all."(4) In order to survive the war he must develop an "edge" by discarding his civilian values, abandoning the person he had been to become a willing participant and propagator of the war's savagery. Eventually, he and his comrades lose all awareness of "the sheer brutality" of their presence. (159) Although he never ascends to the level of enjoyment, as some did, he does nothing to halt its excesses, watching passively when civilians are gunned down. The war is to blame.

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Suspense builds as the plot unfolds in chapters alternating seamlessly between past and present, frontlines and the homefront, the war and after. We learn early on that Murph did not survive and that Bartle feels responsible, but the exact nature of his culpability remains a dark mystery, "a quarrel that will never be resolved."(30) If Bartle reached an accommodation with the war in an effort to get home alive, Murph refused and paid the ultimate price for it. Awash in guilt, Bartle struggles to remember his friend "before he was lost, before he surrendered fully to the war."(80) The distance between the friends grows in Iraq with Bartle being completely non-reflective, seeing "only with the short sight of looking for whatever might kill me" and failing to miss the changes occurring in his friend. Murph resisted the war and its excesses. According to Bartle, Murph "wanted to choose. He wanted to want. He wanted to replace the dullness growing inside of him with anything else … He wouldn't be bound by this place to anything, or anyone, even me. And I was afraid because I wondered what would be required for him to keep his promise to himself."(166) By the time Bartle becomes cognizant of his friend's mental state, it is too late. He will soon go through the wire.

After all of the suspenseful build up, Bartle's act falls a little short of being adequate to the guilt he feels. It proved a bit of a letdown, an opportunity missed to say something more damning about the war, its architects, or American society as a whole. Perhaps it is a fitting end. There is a sense of hopelessness and helplessness in Bartle that only begins to disappear with time and distance. In any situation these salves are the victims' only hope; to put time and distance between themselves and the memories that haunt them. Today, Americans are enjoying the time and distance away from the Iraq War. *The Yellow Birds* forces us to remember and reckon with that not-so-long-ago past. Perhaps if we do, we may look forward to achieving the catharsis that Bartle ultimately experiences.

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